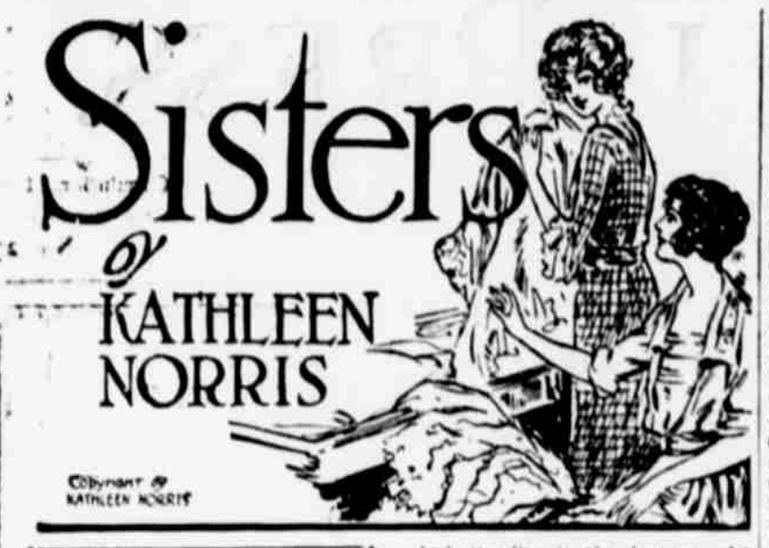
Sisters

by KATHLEEN NORRIS



ASKING DAD.

Synopsis.—Doctor Strickland, retired, is living with his family at Mill Valley, just out of San Francisco. Anne, the doctor's niece, is twenty-four; Alix, the doctor's daughter, is twenty-one. Cherry, the other daughter, is eighteen. Their closest friend is Peter Joyce, an odd, lovable sort of recluse. He is secretly in love with beautiful Cherry. Martin Lloyd, a visiting mining engineer, pays court to Cherry and wins her promise to marry him. While the family are speculating about Cherry and Martin Peter realizes his love for Cherry.

(CHAPTER II—Continued.)

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Presently he selected the sapling redwood, and brought it down with two blows of his ax. The girl seated herself beside him, helped him strip the trunk, their hands constantly touching, the man once or twice delaying her for one more snatched and laughing kiss. And Martin said that he was going to make her the happiest wife a man ever had.

Dragging the stripped tree, they ran down the sharp hill to the house just as Anne came out to announce luncheon. Peter was wandering off in the woods nearby, but came at Alix's shrill yell of summons, and looked relieved when he saw Cherry and Martin not even talking to each other. They had been gone only ten minutes.

It was a happy meal for everyone, and after it they had attacked the rose bush again, with aching muscles now, and in the first real summer heat. It was three o'clock before, with a great crackling, and the scream of a twisted branch, and a general panting and heaving on the part of the workers, at last the feathery mass had risen a foot—two feet—into the air, had stood tottering like a wall of bloom, and finally, with a downward rush, had settled to its old place on the roof. Hong was pressed into service now, and with Martin, was on the roof, grappling with a rope, shouting directions.

There was a rending, slipping noise on the roof, a scream from Martin, and shouts from the doctor and Peter. With a great sliding and rushing of the refractory sprays, and with a horrifying stumbling and falling, down came Martin, caught in a great rope of the creeper, almost at Cherry's feet.

A time of great running and calling ensued. Cherry dropped on her knees beside him, and had his head on her arm for a moment; then her father took her place, and Alix, with an astonished look at the younger girl's wet eyes, drew her sister away. Immediately afterward Martin sat up, looked bewilderedly about from one face to another, looked at his scratched wrist and said "Gee!" in a thoughtful tone.

"You scared Cherry out of ten years' growth!" Alix reproached Martin.

"I—I thought he might have hurt himself!" Cherry said, in the softest of little-girl voices, and with her shy little head hanging. Anne decided that it was becoming her clear duty to talk to Cherry.

A few minutes later Alix, Peter and Martin left for the daily ceremony of walking into the village for the mail.

The house was very still, early summer sweetness was drifting through wide-opened windows and doors; the long day was slowly declining. Anne peeped into the deserted living room, softened through all its pleasant shabbiness into real beauty by the shafts of sunset red that came in through the casement windows; and was deliberating between various becoming occupations—for Martin might walk back with the girls—when her uncle called her.

"Anne—you weren't there when that young chap tumbled. But I've been worrying about it a little. There's no question—there's no question that she—that Cherry—called him by his name. 'Martin,' she called him."

Anne had crossed to the shadowy doorway; she stood still.

"You've not noticed anything between him and Cherry?" pursued the doctor. "A girl might call a man by his name, I suppose—"

"I don't think there has been anything to notice," Anne stated, in a level tone.

"Well, it must be stopped, if it has begun," decided her uncle. "I can't permit it—I'd forgotten how the little witch grows!"

Again Anne was silent. She was not in love with Martin Lloyd; she was not as susceptible as the much younger Cherry, and she had not had his urging to help her to a quick surrender. But for the first time in her life she had been an absolutely suitable man, a man whose work, position, looks, name and character fitted her rather exacting standard, and for the first time she had let herself think confidently of being wooed and won.

And, standing in the doorway, she tasted the last bitter dregs of the dream. It was all over. Anne was at the age that sets twenty-five years as the definite boundary of spinsterhood. She would be twenty-five in August.

Alix came in from her walk glowing, and full of a great discovery.

"Dad," she said eagerly, taking her place at the supper table, "what do you think! I'll bet you a dollar that man is falling in love with our Cherry!"

Anne, at the head of the table, looked pained, but there was genuine apprehension in the doctor's face.

"Where is your sister?" he asked.

"Down there by the gate," Alix answered. "They're gazing soulfully into each other's eyes, and all that! Peter went home. But Cherry—with a beau! Isn't that the ultimate extension of the limit! I'm crazy about it—I think it's great. I love weddings! This'll be the third I've been to!"

"All this seems to have come up very suddenly," the doctor said, dazedly, rumpling his gray hair with a fine old hand. "I don't imagine your sister is taking it as seriously as you and Anne seem inclined to—"

"Oh, does Anne think so?" Alix exclaimed.

"I think Cherry is one of the fortunate girls destined to drift along the surface of life," Anne said, "and to accept wifehood quite simply. I only wish I were that type—"

She was interrupted by Cherry herself. The girl came to the porch door, and as she hesitated there a minute, with her smiling eyes seeking her father's face, they saw that by one firm, small hand she drew her lover beside her. Martin Lloyd's smiling face showed above hers in the lamplight.

"Dad!" Said Cherry, "I've Brought Martin to Supper."

"Dad!" said Cherry, with a childish breath. "Dad! I've brought Martin to supper!"

CHAPTER III.

The three at the table did not move for perhaps twenty slow seconds. Dr. Strickland, who had pushed back his chair, and whose hands were resting on the table before him, stared at them steadily. Anne, with a quick little hiss of surprise, smiled faintly. Alix, the unstilted, widened her eyes, and opened her mouth in unaffected astonishment. For there was no mistaking Cherry's tone.

"Doctor," said Martin, coming in, "this little girl of yours and I have something to tell you!"

The old man looked at him sharply, almost sternly, looked about at the girls' faces, and was silent.

"Are you surprised, Daddy?" Cherry laughed, with all a child's innocent exultation. The next instant Anne and Martin were shaking hands, and Alix had enveloped Cherry in an enthusiastic embrace.

"Surprised!" exclaimed Alix. "Why, aren't you surprised yourself?"

Her sister flushed exquisitely, and Martin laughed.

"We're just about knocked silly!" he confessed, and all the girls laughed joyously.

A place was made for Martin, and biscuits and omelet and honey and tea were put into brisk circulation. Cherry took her chair, all dimples, flushes, smiles, and shy confidence.

"And what are your plans?" Anne asked maternally.

Her uncle, who had been silent during the excitement, mildly interposed:

"I think we needn't go too fast, young people! You've only known each other a few weeks, after all; you must be pretty sure of yourselves before taking anything like a decisive step. Plenty of time—plenty of time. Mr. Lloyd here and I must have some talks about his plans—"

"I know exactly how you feel, Doctor," Martin said, sensibly and sympathetically. "I realize that I should have come to you first, and asked to pay my respects to your daughter. Except that it all came over me with such a rush. A week ago Cherry was only a most attractive child, to me. I'd spoken to my aunt about her and had said that I envied the man that was some day to win her, and that was all! Then the time came for me to get back to work—and I found I couldn't go! And then came last night, when I began to say good-byes, and—it happened! I know that you all hardly know me, and I know that Cherry is pretty young to settle down, but I think I can satisfy you, Doctor, that you give her into safe hands, and I believe she'll never regret trusting me!"

He had gotten to his feet as he spoke and was holding the back of his chair, looking anxiously and eagerly into the old man's eyes.

"Well—" said the doctor, touched, in his gentlest tone, "well! It had to come, perhaps. I can't promise her to you very soon, Mr. Lloyd. But if you both are willing to wait, and if time proves this to be the real feeling, I don't believe you'll find me hard on you!"

"That's all I ask, sir!" Martin said, resuming his seat and his dinner. And for the rest of the meal harmony and gayety reigned.

After dinner Cherry and Martin, in all the ecstatic first delight of recognized love, went out to the wide front porch, where there were wicker chairs, under the rose vines. Alix alone laughed at them as they went. Anne, with a storm in her heart, played noisily on the piano, and the doctor, after giving the doorway where Cherry had disappeared a wistful look, restlessly took to his armchair and his book, in such desolation of spirit as he had not known since the dark day of her mother's death.

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The next day Alix and the engaged pair walked up to invite Peter to a tennis foursome on the old Blithedale court. It was a Saturday, and as he usually dined with them, or asked them to dine with him on Saturday, they were not surprised to find him busy with a charcoal burner, under the trees, compounding a marvelous dish of chicken, tomatoes, cream and mushrooms.

"Stop your messing one second!" Alix said, catching him by the arm. "Congratulate these creatures—they—they're going to be married! Why don't you congratulate them?"

Peter gave one long look at Martin and Cherry, who stood laughing but a little confused and self-conscious, too, in the grassy path. With a shock like death in his heart, he realized that it was all over. Their protection of her, their suspicions, had come too late. Blind child that she was, she was committed to this fascinating and mysterious adventure.

His face grew dark with a sudden rush of blood. But he went to them quickly and shook hands with Martin, and was presently reproaching Cherry for her secretiveness in his old, or almost his old, way.

He arranged that they were to play the tennis here on his own courts, and later dine with him, but under his hospitality and under the golden beauty of the day it was all pain—pain—pain. It was agony to see her with him, beginning to taste the rapture of love given and returned; it was agony to have the conversation return always to Martin and Cherry, to the first love affair. Peter felt that he could have killed this newcomer, this thief, this usurper of the place that he himself might have filled.

"Dad's always said he disapproved of long engagements," Alix commented, amusedly, "but you ought to hear him now! This thing—he won't even call it an engagement—it's an understanding, or a preference—is to be a profound secret, and Cherry's to be twenty-one before any one else but ourselves knows—"

Peter did not hear her. There was beginning a little hope in his heart. Girls did not always fulfill their first engagements; did not often do so, in fact. The thing was a secret; it might well come to nothing, after all.

That was the beginning, and after it, although it was arranged between them all that nothing should be changed, and that nobody but themselves should share the secret, somehow life seemed different. Two or three days after the momentous day of the raising of the rose tree, Martin Lloyd went to his mine at El Nido, and the interrupted current of life in the brown bungalow supposedly found its old groove.

But nothing was the same. The doctor, in the first place, was more silent and thoughtful than the girls had ever seen him before. Anne and Alix knew that he was not happy about Cherry's plans, if the younger girl did not. With Alix only he talked of the engagement, and she knew from his comments, his doubtful manner, that he felt it to be a mistake. The ten years' difference between Cherry and Martin distressed him; he spoke of it again and again.

Cherry was changed, too, and not only in the expected and natural ways, Alix thought. Her daily letter from Martin, her new prospects, not only increased her importance in the other girls' eyes, but innocently inflated her own self-confidence. She had promised to keep the engagement "or understanding, or preference," a profound secret, but this was impossible. First one intimate friend and then another was allowed to gasp and exclaim over the news. The time came when Anne decided that it was not "decent" not to let Martin's aunt know of it, when all these other people knew. Finally came a dinner to the Norths', when Cherry's health was drunk, and then the engagement presents began to come in.

Her father only looked tenderly into the blue eyes and tightened his big arm protectingly about the slender young shoulders. But he was deeply depressed. There was nothing to be said against young Lloyd. It was only—mused the doctor, aghast—only what was being done in the world every day. But he was staggered by the bright readiness with which all of them—Cherry, Martin, the other girls—accepted the stupendous fact that Cherry was to be married.

She was quite frankly and delightedly discussing trousseau now, too entirely absorbed in her own happiness to see that the other girls had lives to live as well as she.

"I got my cards yesterday," she said one day. "I was passing the shop and I thought I might as well! The woman looked at me so queerly; she said: 'Mrs. John Martin Lloyd. Are these for your mother?' 'No,' I said. 'They're for me!' I wish you could have seen her look. Martin says in today's letter that he thinks people

She Was Delightedly Discussing Trousseau Now.

will say I'm his daughter, and Alix—he says that you are to come up to visit us, and we're going to find you a fine husband! Won't it be funny to think of your visiting me! Oh, and Anne—did you see what Mrs. Fairfax sent me? A great big glorious fur coat! She said I would need it up there, and I guess I will! It's not new, you know, she says it isn't the real present, but it can be cut down and it will look like new."

And so on and on. The other girls listened, sympathized and rejoiced, but it was not always easy.

August brought Martin. He was delighted with his work in the El Nido mine, the "Emmy Younger," and everything he had to say about it was amusing and interesting. It was still in a rather chaotic condition, he reported, but the "stuff" was there, and he anticipated a busy winter. He was to have a cottage, a pretty crude affair, in a few weeks, right at the mine.

"How does that listen to you?" he asked Cherry. She gave her father a demure and interrogative glance. Martin, following it, immediately sobered.

"Just what is your position there?" the doctor asked, pleasantly.

"A little bit of everything, now," Martin answered, readily and respectfully. "Later, of course, I shall have my own special work. At present I'm doing some of the assaying and have charge of the sluice-gang. They want me to make myself generally useful, make suggestions, take hold in every way!"

"That's the way to get on," the older man said, approvingly. Cherry looked admiringly, with all her heart in her eyes, at her husband-to-be; the other girls were impressed, too. Martin had not been with them more than a few hours before the engagement was openly discussed, and there were constant references to Cherry's marriage.

Somehow, a few days later, wedding plans were in the air, and they were all taking it for granted that Cherry and Martin were to be married almost immediately; in October, in fact. The doctor at first persisted that the event must wait until April, but Martin's reasonable impatience and Cherry's plaintive "But why, Daddy?" were too much for him. Why, indeed? Cherry's mother had been married at eighteen, when that mother's husband was more than ten years older than Martin Lloyd was now.

"Would ye let it go on, eh?" the doctor asked, somewhat embarrassed, one evening when he and Peter were walking from the train in the late September twilight.

"This is the place, Baby Girl; El Nido, and not much of a place.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Persons Non Grata.

Banks—"Did you ever attend any of Miss Budd's 'at-homes'?" Boreleigh (sadly)—"No, but I've attended a good many of her not at homes."—Boston Transcript.

An Opportunity.

"I never saw the equal of those Jagsbys next door," said Mr. Bibbles. "They are always wanting to borrow something. I honestly believe we've lent them everything in the house except the piano and our twin beds."

"I'm sorry you are so wrought up," said Mrs. Bibbles. "Mr. Jagsby has just sent over to know if—"

"Don't say it! Don't say it!"

"If you have a few empty bottles you could spare, pint or quart size."

"Out of the way, woman! I'll take them over myself."—Birmingham Age-Herald.

A Puzzling Case.

North—"How is Dobbs getting along with his wife?" West—"I can't decide whether he needs sympathy or advice."

Some men are born liars, while others acquire the art.

Simple Explanation.

Mary and her cousin Susan were placed in a room by themselves to play with their dolls and picture books. For half an hour all went well, then there was a sound of lamentation. Mary's mother opened the door to learn what the trouble was and found Susan seated on the floor loudly proclaiming her grief to the ceiling while Mary, leaning on her elbows, chin resting on her hands, was gazing nonchalantly into the back yard.

"Now, what's the matter?" mother asked.

"Well," answered Mary, turning her face toward her mother, "both of us wanted to look out at the day, and both of us couldn't."

Put His Foot in It.

She—It seems strange that you did not remember my face, yet you remembered my name.

He (awkwardly)—Well, you know, you have an attractive sort of name.